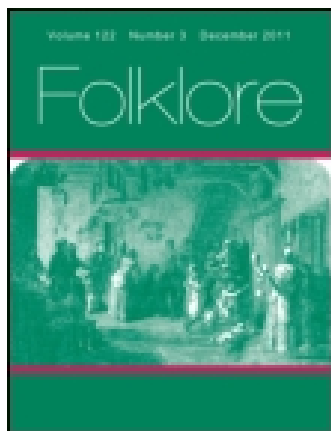


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SOME NOTES ON FOLK MEDICINE IN THE EASTERN COUNTIES

L. F. NEWMAN, M.A., F.S.A.

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THE healing art is one of the oldest professions, but only comparatively recently has it been based on scientific method and assisted by the development of chemistry, physiology and pharmacology. The earliest known examples of surgery date from prehistoric times and the strenuous conditions of life in the past afforded plenty of opportunities for practice. Very delicate operations such as boring holes in the skull, bone resection and, quite probably, amputations, were carried out. Bone injuries are the only evidence available by which the ability of the primitive surgeon can be judged and it is impossible to say what work was carried out on the soft parts. Within the last hundred years the discovery of anaesthetics and the maintenance of surgical cleanliness have so improved operative conditions that a famous surgeon recently expressed the opinion that, except for details, his profession had probably progressed as far as was possible. Although everyone may have to carry out simple treatment such as bandaging a cut finger or the very useful help of the "First Aid" training courses, serious operative work is necessarily restricted to the trained surgeon. The practice of medicine presents fewer manipulative difficulties. It consists, essentially, of correct diagnosis from observation of a number of more or less obscure symptoms, and it is fortunate that many of the common (and serious) diseases of man and of animals present definite and clearly marked characteristics which can be recognized by any intelligent and observant person. A great deal of the terror caused by the epidemics of the Middle Ages was due to the strange and unknown characteristics of the new visitation. No treatment was effective; the unfamiliar symptoms frightened the ordinary people and caused—as is usual with the unknown—the outbreaks of cruelty and selfishness which, with many noble exceptions, disgraced Western civilization when the "Black Death" of 1345-50 swept through Europe.¹ Probably a number approaching half the population of the Eastern Counties of England died during that period. Similar scenes, although less violent in character, marked the appearance of the Great Plague in 1665, but ordinary everyday diseases, smallpox, jaundice, malaria and other common illnesses were accepted philosophically as an unavoidable part of the everyday troubles of life.

The cures and practices of folk medicine fall into four distinct classes :

(1) The use of common plant or animal material which has a real therapeutic value and would be used in orthodox medicine if other—and more convenient—drugs were not available.

¹ See Nohl, *The Black Death* and Gasquet, *The Black Death*.

(2) The administration of plant or animal material, useless for the purpose for which it is employed, and which can have no possible value as a curative agent for the condition for which it is applied.

(3) The use of plants in a semi-magical connection, e.g. "signature plants" or of "Culpeper cures".

(4) Purely magical treatment, incantations, amulets, magical formulae and charms.

The Eastern Counties provide excellent examples of all these methods and they are still employed in local folk medicine.

The white witch or wise woman was (and still is) a feature of most country districts and she drew impartially on any form of cure which might best meet the particular case she had in hand. Faith played a large part, and each customer required special treatment. The white witch was a shrewd judge of character and generally knew the appropriate method to appeal to the credulity of her varied clients.

The travelling quack doctor was a common sight at fairs and markets down to the middle of the last century. He often travelled with a professional troupe of clowns or jugglers to attract customers, he employed trained pharmacists to prepare the medicines he sold and was a very serious rival to the orthodox local practitioners.² Some Cambridge residents may remember the old itinerant herbalist who attended the Saturday market and used a number of crude chemical tricks as tests for alleged diseases with which to frighten the country people into purchasing his remedies.

¹ During the Middle Ages and as late as the eighteenth century, Herbals were compiled by medical botanists, mainly to supply information which would allow their readers to identify plants in the field and to apply remedies for the appropriate diseases. They were usually large dignified volumes and profusely illustrated with woodcuts to make identification easier. These volumes varied very much in value. Usually a good deal of space was devoted to the "vertues" of the plants described. The illustrations were sometimes very accurately drawn and the plants figured easily recognizable, but others were almost valueless for identification purposes. Most of the Herbals contained long descriptions of medicinal plants.

The mediaeval druggist was not tied down to any particular pharmacopoeia, or list of "official" medicinal plants, and he collected some of his own drugs locally, but the local wise woman had an even wider choice. She knew of a considerable number of "simples" that is plants used as herbal remedies in the form of draughts, poultices, "teas", and ointments and she, also, collected her own material. Plants when properly dried could be stored and were available for years. The teaching chests of Dr. Addenbrooke and Professor Viganì at Cambridge, contain specimens of aromatic plants which are still as strongly scented as when they were freshly gathered.

Preserved plant material could be used either as a powder or an infusion

² For details see *Japhet in search of a Father*, Captain Marryat, and *The Leech of Folkestone*, Barham, for contemporary sketches of quacks and mountebanks. Also *The Quacks of Old London*, C. J. S. Thompson.

made by pouring boiling water on the dry material. If the mixture was boiled for some time, it was known as a decoction. No doubt fatal accidents took place from the use of poisonous plants due to errors in identification and resulting from ignorance on the part of the herbalist. The symptoms of poisoning might be obscure and many quaint death records occur in parish registers. "Visitation of God" was an open confession of ignorance, but such descriptions of the cause of death as "Griping of the guts" and "Flux" show that there was every possibility that gross poisoning cases might pass undetected. Old ladies, when their teeth decayed, suffered from indigestion and flatulence, and it was usual for them to carry a nutmeg in a small wooden or metal case and to grate a little on their food (or drink) as a carminative. These cases were often made of silver and elaborately engraved. They took the place of the snuffboxes carried by men, although ladies were also addicted to snuff-taking and the habit was universal. Tobacco was regarded as a prophylactic against infection especially plague.³ In 1665 boys were compelled to smoke in school and Hearne quotes an Etonian who said that he was never whipped so soundly as he was one morning for not smoking.⁴ Pepys, when he first saw the red cross on a plague house, bought roll tobacco to smell and chew, and he also mentions the case of a cabman who cured his horse of the staggers by blowing tobacco into its nostrils.⁵ Old people, too, suffered from what was known as "a rising of the lights." This was probably either water-brash or flatulence and the victims sometimes took a charge of smallshot to keep the lights down. The treatment was said to be very effective.⁶

I. BOOKS ON HERBAL REMEDIES

Women who were responsible for the health of school-children, or who took an interest in the village people of their district, were often extremely well read in the medical science of their time. One of the most interesting printed books dealing with the Eastern Counties is "The Queen-like Closet"; a compendium of domestic management, cookery, needlework and home medicine. It was published in 1680 by a Mrs. Hannah Woolley, wife of the schoolmaster at Newport Pond, Essex. She was responsible for the wellbeing of the boys at the school, and was consulted not only in her own village, but over a considerable part of Essex as an unofficial doctor. In the introduction of her book Mrs. Woolley says: "My Mother and my Elder Sisters were very well skilled in Physick and Chyrurgery, from whom I learned a little, and at the age of seventeen Had the fortune to belong to a Noble Lady in this Kingdom till I Married which was at 24 years (These 7 years I was with her) she finding my genius, and being of a Charitable temper to do good among her poor Neighbours, I had her

³ Kemp, *A brief treatise of the Nature, Causes, Signs, Preservation from, and cure of the Pestilence 1665.*

⁴ *Reliquiae Hearnianae*, edited by P. Bliss, ed. 1869.

⁵ *Pepys Diary*, Wheatley ed., Vol. iv. p. 401 and vol. vii. p. 67.

⁶ *A Treatise on Medical Jurisprudence*, Dr. Vivian Poore, ed. 1902.

purse at command to buy what Ingredients might be required to make Balsams, Salves, Oyntments, Waters for Wounds, Oyls, Cordials and the like." The lady also bought her maid books and obtained information for her from medical men so that, Mrs. Woolley says: "I soon became a Practitioner, and did begin with Cut-fingers, Bruises, Aches, Agues, Headach, Bleeding at the Nose, Felons, Whitloes on the Fingers, Sore Eyes, Drawing of Blisters, Burning, Tooth-ach, and anything commonly incident. . . . When I was Married to Mr. Woolley we lived together at Newport Pond in Essex, near Saffron Walden seven years; my Husband having been Master of that Free School fourteen years before. We having many Boarders my skill was often exercised among them, for oftentimes they got mishaps when they were playing, and oftentimes fell into distempers, as Agues, Fevers, Meazles, Small-Pox, Consumptions, and many other Diseases, in all of which unless they were desperately ill, their Parents trusted me without the help of any Physician or Chirurgeon: likewise the Neighbours for 8 or 10 miles round came to me for Cure. . . . A woman being kicked by a Churlish Husband on her Leg, so that a vein was burst, whereby she lost at the least a pottle of Blood; I stayed the Blood and cured her leg. . . . One being much bruised by Rogues meeting him on the way, and after they had beaten him down, kicked him on one side of his Head so that his Ear was swelled, you could see no shape it had, and withal fell into a Feavor, I by God's help did Cure. . . . A man lying sick of the Meazles, and being all struck in, so that it was thought that he could not possibly have lived, I give him a Cordial which brought them forth and recovered him. . . . A cancer in the nose I have cured. . . . The Green sickness in many. Dropsie, Jaundies, Scurvy, Sciatica, Gripping of the guts, Vomiting and Looseness."

Mrs. Woolley is rather reticent as to the nature of the medicines she administered to these patients, but in her book she gives a number of prescriptions, many of them prepared from local plants. The following examples afford a general idea of her use of plant and animal remedies; some of them may have been useful but the majority could only cure by suggestion.

(1) For any Ague whatever, Take of the dried leaves of Laurel which is esteemed in Gardens. Take of the fine powder thereof as much as will lye upon sixpence by heap, mix it with any liquid thing, and take it one hour or two before the fit comes; do this three times and go to bed and keep Warm.

(2) For the Shingles, Tak a Cat and cut off her Ears, or her Tail, and mix the Bloud thereof with a little new Milk, and anoint the grieved place with it Morning and Evening for three days; and every night when the Party goes to Bed give him or her two spoonfuls of Treacle-water, to drive out the venom.

(3) For the falling Sickness. Take a live Mole, and cut the throat of it into a Glass of White-wine, and presently give it to the party to drink at the New and Full of the Moon (*viz.*) the day before the New, the day of the New, and the day after, and so at the Full. This will Cure absolutely if the Party be not above forty years of Age.

(4) For a Cancer in the Breast ; or to Cure sore Eyes There is no better thing in the World than to take inwardly Sows or Woodlice, in this manner following : Take about six-score of them alive, and wash them in a little White-wine, then bruise them well in a Porringer with the back of a Spoon, then pour some clear White-wine into them, and strain the juice of them into a quart of Whitewine or Ale, but Whitewine is better, keep it in a Glass bottle, and every Morning fasting, and at four of the Clock in the Afternoon drink one quarter of a pint of it, so long as you find you need it. Then take a quart of Spring-water that rises in the East, and boyl therein two handfulls of red-sage till half be consumed, then strain it out and put in a little Rock-Allom and then some Honey. Heat them together over the fire and put in a Glass for your use : lay nothing to your Breast but linnen Cloths dipped in this Sage water warmed, Morning and Evening. It is the Wood-lice that doth the Cure, for any Drink that is made of them, especially if it be in White wine doth not only Cure a Cancer in the Breast but also sore Eyes, Scurvy, drowsiness in the Brain, Convulsion-fits in Children or in Older people, or any manner of obstructions for they will carry out all evil and venomous Humours out of the Body.

(5) For a Gow that Stales blood. Take a good handfull of the Herb called Peruwinkle and bruise it, and boyl it in a quart of Ale till it come to a pint, then strain it and give it her to drink ; do so three times. Peruwinkle hath also an excellent virtue to stench bleeding at the Nose in Christians if it be made into a garland and hung about the Neck.

(6) For the running Gout, or any hot Tumor, Take Mallows, Violet-leaves, Marsh Mallows, Melilot, of each Two handfulls, Linseeds beaten two ounces, crumbs of Bread as much ; boil these in Milk and make a Poultis therewith ; then put into a little Oil of Roses, and apply it to the grieved place very warm twice a day.

(7) For a Squinacy or other sore Throat Take the whitest dung of a Dog which he hath dunged abroad in May, let it dry in the Sun very well, and when you have occasion to use it, beat it fine and searce it and give the Party thereof a slight spoonful in a Glass of Whitewine ; and mix some with Honey and spread it and lay to the Throat : let the Plaister be on, and take the other three nights and it will cure you.

(8) For a tickling Rheum and Cough. Take of Conserve of Fox-lungs two ounces, Syrup of Colts-foot, Syrup of Maidenhair, Syrup of Horehound, Syrup of Hysop, Syrup of Violets, of each one ounce ; mix them well together and take them often in the day or night, upon a Liqueurish-stick.

(9) An excellent remedy for the Stone. Take White-wine and quench a black Flint in it five several times, then sweeten it with Syrup of Marsh Mallows, and take it Morning and Evening for three days.

Mrs. Woolley used a large number of plants which she could obtain locally and she, no doubt, prepared many of the preparations quoted above. Special ingredients—mineral salts, etc.,—would be purchased from the local apothecaries who were well stocked with spices, spirit, and other still-room requirements as well as the raw material for medicinal preparations.

There are several other books similar in character to Mrs. Woolley, but a later East county publication "The Country Housewife's Family Companion or Profitable Directions for whatever relates to the Management and Good Economy of the Domestick concerns of a Country Life, etc.", by W. Ellis, Farmer, of Little Gaddesdon, Herts, published in 1750, may be mentioned. It provides many interesting side-lights on the domestic side of farm life in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Ellis gives directions for making a number of herb gruels. These were much used in folk-medicine and the base was usually oatmeal porridge with the chopped herbs added. Smallage (*Apium graveolens*) was an important constituent and one or two examples of the gruels may be quoted: (1) This Sort of Gruel (Smallage) is said to purify the blood, open obstructions, begat an Appetite, is good against Shortness of Breath, purges by Urine, and is prevalent against Jaundice, Agues and sore Throats. (2) A Herb Gruel. Make Water just boil, put in either Scurvy-grass, or Corn-sallad, Spinnage, Brooklime, Elder-berries, Smallage, Nettle-tops, Clivers, Cresses and the like. Then take your Water off the Fire and let it stand five or six Minutes with the Herbs in it, and having some Oatmeal tempered with cold Water, put that into it and brew it out of one Pot into another many times with Salt and Butter, till it is fit to eat.

Ellis quotes an unknown author who, in a month, cured himself of gravel with a gruel containing: Nettle-tops, Elder-buds, Groundsel, Shepherd's-purse, Plantane, Cresses, Clivers, etc., with butter and bread added to the mixture. Bran was often used as a basis for gruel and the mixture sweetened with barley sugar or honey.

Some other cures given by this writer are: A cure for pleurisy . . . Our Country Women before they bleed try Camomile by boiling a Boys Handful of it in a Pint of middling Ale a little while, strain, sweeten it with a half-pennyworth of Treacle, as soon as it is drunk go to bed laying the boiled camomile to the side where the pain is. For colds, Colt's-foot, Horehound and Mint boiled in ale and the mixture sweetened: For Jaundice the juice of chickweed mixed with a little saffron. Jaundice was a very common complaint and another cure given by Ellis is to drink nine live lice in a little ale every morning for a week. The use of lice as a remedy for jaundice is very old and widely-spread and it is interesting to note that Ellis considered tea drunk in the early morning, to be a cause of this disease. He also gives the preparation of a number of herb "teas" and cures for more serious complaints. An interesting one is:

A cure for Leprosy: drink an infusion of Fumitory in Whey. Fumitory (*Fumaria officinalis*) a common annual weed was used in the Middle Ages, not only as a drug but for fumigations against witches and it is one of the oldest folk remedies. In the seventeenth century there were several substitutes for tea, among them the leaves of the Speedwells.⁷

⁷ *Johannis Franci, Veronica theæ sans id est collatio Veronicæ Europææ cum theæ Chinotico* 1699.

Ellis quotes the case of a gentle-woman " who, having a swelled tumid Hand, put her Finger into a Cat's Ear, within two hours she was delivered of her pain ; but the Cat was so pained that two Men could hardly hold her."

II. TRADITIONAL HERBAL CURES

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ladies of the county families were good housekeepers and kept a commonplace book into which were copied indiscriminately, recipes for cookery, herbal cures, physicians' prescriptions, veterinary notes, and directions for making paints, pigments, furniture cleaners etc. The medical items are often substantiated by details of the cures effected and some of the mixtures must have been effective for minor troubles.

One of our earliest spring plants, the Lesser Celandine or Pilewort (*Ranunculus Ficaria*), whose yellow flowers appear in April, was in very great repute as a cure for Haemorrhoids. The whole plant was chopped up and heated with lard which was filtered hot to separate the plant material. The preparation was used as an ointment and in recent years its value has been recognised so that Pilewort preparations can be obtained from many chemists. The Skull Cap (*Scutellaria galericulata*), a common East-country plant of wet places is still in general use, and the St John's Wort (*Hypericum* spp.) yields a resin-like substance which acts as a protective coating for broken chilblains or bedsores. Its value is now realized, and preparations of this old remedy are obtainable. Silver weed (*Potentilla Anserina*) was in very great repute as a rural cure for the common trouble of " sore feet ". It is still employed by country people and its value is so generally accepted that there seems to be no doubt that it is effective. Saffron, once grown at Saffron Walden, is used, in two widely separated counties—Essex and Cornwall—as a flavouring for cakes and pastry, and it is also taken medicinally. The active principle, Colchicum, of the Meadow Saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) is still in the Pharmacopoeia as a drug for the relief of gout.

Poppies were grown extensively in the Fens. The capsules were gathered green and when boiled with beer formed a useful anodyne for the chronic misery of ague, once so prevalent in the district. Ague, or malaria, has disappeared from the Eastern counties, but up to the last century it was common in Cambridgeshire and Essex. It was known as the " Bailiff of the marshes ". No convincing explanation has as yet been brought forward to account for its disappearance, but it has been suggested that the drainage of the marshes and fens diminished the numbers of the mosquito carrying the disease.⁸ Opium was largely used as a palliative and opium pills were sold in the East country towns, but the poorer people depended on decoctions of poppy heads to make life bearable. The natives of the fens acquired a certain degree of immunity or tolerance to malaria but strangers coming into the districts contracted the disease

⁸ Nuttall, Cobbett and Strangeways-Pigg. Studies in relation to malaria. *Journal of Hygiene*, Vol. I, p. 4.

and often died from it. Defoe in his description of the Essex marshes relates the often quoted story of the men who made a livelihood by marrying town girls with money and bringing them to live in malarial districts. When the women settled in the marsh country, they contracted malaria and died, and after a decent interval the widower repeated the process.⁹ Defoe mentions the case of a man who was reputed to have married 25 wives in the course of a life devoted to this form of fortune hunting. A son of this much married man had, at the age of 35, taken "about" 14 wives. Defoe says that he obtained this information from "a merry fellow" so the numbers may be exaggerated! A well-known folk cure for malaria was to swallow spiders or pills made of spider-webs, and recently this has been shown to have some pharmacological basis.¹⁰ Another cure was to add pepper to port or ale and drink the mixture.

Mullein (*Verbascum Thapsus*) is still used as a cure for colds, sore throats, chest troubles, and hoarseness. The leaves, when digested with water, yield a thick mucilaginous liquid, and this was mixed with a flavouring of some bitter herb such as Tansy or Mugwort.

Ground ivy (*Nepeta hederacea*), also known as "Hedge maids", was used to flavour beer, and the mixture administered as a cure for colds and coughs. Many plants which yielded a bitter principle were dried to make the teas taken as mild tonics or stomachics. They are still used and some of them have a definite value as they help to relieve the digestive troubles met with in country people who live on a badly selected diet. The hop is still the universal flavouring agent for beer, and any tonic effect "bitter beer" may have is due to the humulin extracted from the hop strobile. It has some preservative value, and is sometimes added to dough for bread making. Young hop shoots eaten like asparagus are still given as a "cleansing medicine".

Fen-berries or Marsh Whortles are stated by Muffett¹¹ to grow in the Isle of Ely, and to be used as astringents or "binding medicines". Gerarde¹² says the Whortle-berries are cold, dry with a certaine binding qualitie, and they take away the heat of burning agues. This Fen-berry was probably the cranberry (*Vaccinium Oxycoccus*) which was found in the Fens in Muffett's time. The country names of many common plants remind us of the "vertues" with which they were credited or the diseases for which they were used: Pilewort, Rupture-wort, Wound wort, and Sneezewort are examples while the names of poisonous plants such as, Devil's apple, Death caps, Deadly nightshade and Henbane are grimly significant of their properties.

⁹ Defoe, *Tour of the whole Island of Great Britain*.

¹⁰ Mackenzie, *The Infancy of Medicine*.

¹¹ *Health's Improvement or Rules comprizing and discovering the Nature, Method and Manner of preparing all sorts of Food*. Dr. T. Muffett, 2nd Ed., corrected and enlarged by C. Bennett, 1655.

¹² Gerarde and Johnson, *The Herball, or General Historie of Plants*, ed. 1636.

III. SIGNATURE PLANTS

The doctrine of signatures—that is the belief that herbs cured diseases where the obvious physical symptoms resembled, superficially, parts of the plant—was carried to absurd lengths in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For example, the common garden escape Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*) has large leaves with pale green blotches all over them, and, by a considerable stretch of the imagination, may be said to resemble a section of lung tissue. By the doctrine of signatures Lungwort leaves should therefore cure diseases of the organs which they resemble. The Eye-bright (*Euphrasia officinalis*) has marks on the flower thought to resemble an eye and so it should be a specific for diseases of the eye. One application of the doctrine of signatures has proved to be of medicinal value and led to the discovery of salicylates as a cure for rheumatism and rheumatic fever. The glucoside salicin occurs in nature in willow bark; the willows growing in wet places should, it was argued, cure the diseases of damp districts and the bark of various species of willow was used in the fens (and other wet places) as a cure for rheumatic fever or rheumatism acquired from life in such areas. Medical observations showed that willow bark was really effective and although the glucoside is not used in medicine now-a-days as other and better preparations are available, the doctrine of signatures led to the discovery of a most valuable group of drugs. Solomons' seal has marks on the root said to resemble bruises and Gerarde¹³ says, "It taketh away in one night, or two at the most, any bruise, black or blew spots, gotten by fals or woman's wilfulness in stumbling on their hasty husbands fists."

IV. MAGICAL CURES

Under this head may be grouped the use of spoken charms or spells, written formulae and ritual acts.

Hernia is fairly common in children. An almost universal treatment for this trouble was (and still is) to split the stem of a young tree and pass the child through the opening. The tree was bound up again, and as the wood closed up and healed so did the child's condition improve. Congenital hernia does sometimes undergo spontaneous healing as the infant grows so that this treatment would show a very fair proportion of cures and the writer has seen trees near Cambridge which have been used for this practice. All over the Eastern Counties it is usual for people to carry potatoes in their pockets and they will assert that the potato "does a power of good" in keeping rheumatism at bay. A hare's foot is also effective for the same purpose as are nutmegs.¹⁴

Sir Kenelm Digby produced his "sympathetic powder" or salve about three hundred years ago and his treatment became very popular. A wound was covered with simple wet compresses, while the weapon or tool which caused it was greased, treated with the powder or salve, and

¹³ Gerarde and Johnson, *The Herball, or General Historie of Plants*, ed. 1636.

¹⁴ Black, *Folk Medicine*, published by the Folk-Lore Society.

carefully wrapped up. Then the wound healed by "sympathy". The underlying idea was that some connection between an injury and the immediate cause of it existed. This belief is still prevalent all over the Eastern Counties and there is a widespread acceptance of its truth.

The foot of a mole wrapped in cloth and carried in the pocket is thought to be a protection against cramp, and the writer has seen the feet of moles being dried for this purpose.

The common plant Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) was in great repute as a charm to increase endurance. Cole¹⁵ says: "If a footman take mugwort and put it in his shoes in the morning he may go forty miles before noon and not be weary." Again an old book of cures,¹⁶ asserts that: "They that travel if they carry mugwort will never tire and Mugwort beaten with hog's grease and laid on cures the paines and weariness of the feet." In all probability, the hog's grease alone would be equally efficacious. Mugwort was employed for the cure of a number of diseases especially those of women, and is still a popular folk remedy.

Many plants were used as simples for no reason other than a supposed magical value. Yarrow or Millefoil (*Achillea Millefolium*) was employed in the fens, as a cure for ague, while Burnet (*Poterium Sanguisorba*), Toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*) and Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*) were in great repute for the preparation of cosmetics. The use of dock leaves for the relief of pain resulting from nettle stings is well known. The leaves are large and cool and, no doubt, to some extent, relieve the irritation caused by a nettle sting.

Whooping-cough, Epilepsy, Jaundice and Warts seem to be the diseases especially curable by magical or other treatment. In all probability the large number of folk cures used for these common ailments was due to the fact that they persisted for a long time and were specially distressing to the patients.

On the East coast children are still sent to meet the incoming tide as a cure for whooping-cough; as the tide ebbs the cough is carried away. Inland, in Norfolk and Suffolk, a well-known treatment for the same trouble is for the parents, alone and at night, to dig a hole in the ground and hold the child's head in it until he or she coughs.¹⁷ The whooping-cough is left in the hole and the patient cured.

V. CULINARY PLANTS WITH REPUTED MEDICINAL VALUE

Glasswort (*Salicornia spp.*) is a common sea-shore plant of the Eastern Counties. It is always known as "Samphire" although that name is properly restricted to *Criothmum maritimum*, the samphire of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which grows on cliffs overhanging the sea, while *Salicornia* is found on sandy or muddy intertidal marshes. The plant is gathered early in the summer and the bushy variety is considered to be the best. The slender species, known locally as Sheep's samphire are not used for

¹⁵ *The Art of Simpling*, 1656.

¹⁶ See Leyall, *The Magic of Herbs* quoting Petrus Bayrus.

¹⁷ Black, *Folk Medicine*, published by the Folk-Lore Society.

food. The whole plant may be boiled and eaten hot as a fresh vegetable, but the usual method is to preserve the plants and eat them as a "relish". Samphire makes the best pickle known to epicures and there are two methods of preparation: one, for plants intended for immediate consumption, is to pour warm vinegar over the freshly boiled plant. The other and more elaborate process is to cook the samphire slowly with vinegar and spices. The plants are then bottled and will keep almost indefinitely. Samphire is not much used as a food inland, but it is a regular article of diet in the villages along the East coast, and a brisk trade in freshly gathered plants is carried on during the summer.

Gerarde says: "a little quantitie of the herb taken inwardly doth not only mightily provoke urine but in like sort casteth forth the dead childe. It draweth forth by siege, waterie humors and purgeth away the dropsie. The ashes are likewise tempered with those medicines that seme to take away sealis and filth of the skin. It easily consumeth proud and superfluous flesh that groweth in poisonous ulcers. The smell and smoke of the herb being burnt drives away serpents."¹⁸ Gerard includes two or three different plants under the terms glasswort. The ash is rich in potash.

Young bracken fronds can be cooked like asparagus, although they are not very palatable, and hop shoots are eaten in the same way. These coarse fibrous plants provide a convenient form of "roughage" for country people who live largely on milk, bread and cheese. Young nettles form a most delicate vegetable when boiled like spinach, but are only available for a short time in the spring; the plant is credited with special properties as a "blood purifier" which in folk medicine means an aperient or any plant fibrous enough to stimulate the digestive tract.

Salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*) is closely allied to the common Goat's-beard, the more obvious difference in appearance being that the capitulum or head has purple flowers instead of yellow. It was probably introduced as a garden vegetable, but has "escaped" and become fairly common in the Eastern Counties. Sometimes the whole plant is boiled and eaten like celery, but the fleshy root is the most palatable part. It has a rather bitter flavour but is credited with a special value in cases of jaundice or to promote liver action. Good King Harry (*Chenopodium Bonus-Henricus*) also a garden escape is boiled and eaten like spinach, and goat's-beard can be used like salsify. Both plants are reputed to taste like oysters.

The common blackberry is excellent either raw, stewed or as a preserve. Like most fruits with pips, it is a natural bulk food and so relieves constipation. The different varieties of blackberry ripen at varying times during late summer and autumn, but all over Great Britain and Ireland there is a general belief that blackberries must not be eaten after Michaelmas day. There are two Michaelmas days in this country—the "new" quarter-day, September 29th, and "old" Michaelmas, October 11th, which is still recognized over a great part of the Eastern Counties, especially in connection with farm Tenancies. It was believed that after Michaelmas blackberries were unwholesome as "the Devil has spat on

¹⁸ Gerard & Johnson's *Herball*.

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them ", and they were not gathered later than that date. It is true that late in the season blackberries are infested by flies especially if there are near-by cesspools and may cause acute intestinal trouble.

Many other native plants are cooked and eaten, partly as foods and partly for their alleged medicinal value, but the examples given fairly represent the local medicinal-culinary plants. Young nettles cooked are an excellent vegetable, but a " broth of nettles " was an old remedy for purifying the blood. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the wealthier families over-drunk and over-ate. Their food was rich and stimulating, and as it was difficult, in the towns, to obtain fresh fruit and vegetables, the necessity for " blood purifiers " was obvious. The poorer classes lived on an unsuitable diet with too little roughage. The evils of so-called malnutrition may easily be over-estimated, and appetite is a fair guide of any deficiency. as mankind tends to balance diets naturally. The cannibal " fills up " with earth or bark to provide roughage with his concentrated food, and the Chinese or Indian labourer varies his tasteless rice with curries or Bombay duck. The English countryman eats fibrous material to correct the effects of a too-starchy diet, and uses herb teas and pungent herb dishes to vary a too-monotonous menu. Colds, catarrhs, and other pulmonary complaints with indigestion and rheumatic troubles, account for much of the minor miseries of life and we find that most of the common folk remedies are administered to relieve the troublesome rather than the serious diseases.